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Establishing Partnerships between the Business Community and Rural Schools.

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TEXT: An effective way to help develop a strong rural educational program is to establish a business partnership between the rural school and the business community. Once this relationship is in place, the advantages for both the schools and business community can prove beneficial to the entire rural community. For a partnership between a business and a school to be effective, each party must be willing to define its specific needs and demonstrate a desire to make the partnership work.

WHAT IS A SCHOOL-BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP?

Generally defined, a partnership is a mutual agreement between a business and a school to establish certain goals, and to construct a reasonable means of achieving those goals. The term "school-business partnership" is distinguished from the "adopt a school" concept by the fact that a true school-business partnership is not an inner-city program geared toward helping only disadvantaged students. The present focus of school-business partnerships is on improving the overall educational system and perhaps aiding in community development as well.

WHAT KINDS OF PARTNERSHIPS EXIST?

The types of partnerships that are formed between a school and a business depend on what each party hopes to achieve. The objectives of each party will determine whether the type of partnership will be directly involved in the overall school program or whether it will be indirectly involved, or involved in just a specific area of the school program. Some school-business partnerships are only partnerships in the sense that both parties wish the relationship be as uncomplicated as possible. In this kind of partnership the business might provide funds and equipment for the school program while the school might reciprocate by publicly giving credit to the business. Another type of partnership, the long-term partnership, is usually more complex in nature. Long-term partnerships usually have well-defined purposes, and both parties work closely together to accomplish their objectives. These partnerships often provide programs to help enrich school programs, such as sending professional business people to teach mini-courses. Long-term partnerships are frequently concerned with developing enriching career education programs and providing on-the-job training.

HOW CAN PARTNERSHIPS BE EFFECTIVE FOR THE RURAL SCHOOL?

Along with today's emphasis on effective education comes the constant pressure of budget cutbacks of public education funds. Forming a strong school-business partnership can help ease some of the budget woes, permit the business community to take responsibility for the quality of education, and make the transition from school to work easier. Rural schools frequently do not have the monies for new equipment or innovative teaching projects. Partnerships can help supply funds and professional expertise for hands-on projects or pilot programs which the rural school budget may not be able to cover but which the school wants to incorporate into its curriculum. An example of this might be an agreement between a local bank and a school to stimulate life skill activities as motivating factors to achieving learning objectives. Often businesses can provide workshops for students and staff, provide up-to-date equipment, or provide direct on-the-job training. Many partnerships are formed because both the rural school and business community find themselves concerned about the lack of rural career enrichment programs. With budget cuts and the increased attention being given to the back-to-basics movement, schools are finding that they have to decide whether they can afford to include arts and humanities in their curriculum. Rural educators who are concerned about the importance of arts and humanities to students'

overall educational and cultural growth should look toward possible partnerships to fulfill this need.

Arts and humanities programs frequently discover a need to bring in outside instructional resources. Again, partnerships can fill that void by functioning as a liaison for the school and a cultural center, for example. With the support of a partnership, schools can encourage teachers to work closely with cultural centers to stimulate student creativity.

HOW CAN BUSINESS BENEFIT FROM THE SCHOOL-BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP?

A good partnership may prove to be invaluable to both the rural school and the business community. By cooperating with the rural schools in developing strong career and educational programs, the rural business community may not have to depend on outside skilled help. Large businesses which form partnerships with rural schools are assuring their own future with the knowledge that the future work force may be the finished product of their involvement in quality education.

WHY ARE PARTNERSHIPS FORMED?

--Mutual desire to improve the quality of education. Rural schools are usually too small to offer a large variety of educational services. Too often, enriching activities such as field trips and special workshops are not available to rural schools. The reasons for this vary--lack of funding, lack of facilities, or simply a lack of qualified staff. In order to give rural school students the same opportunities for quality education which are available to many urban schools, outside resources should be considered. A good partnership can bring in a wide range of fields and professionals to satisfy the need and contribute to the broadening of rural students' social and career perspectives.

--A need to uplift the morale of the educational system and the rural community regarding education. While the back-to-basics movement itself may not be a hard subject to deal with, recent criticism of public education has, to some extent, taken its toll on school and community morale. The business community can play a vital role in uplifting the morale of both the educational system and the community by being involved in the whole school program. Partnerships can function as a liaison in the improvement of community-school programs.

--The school's need for financial funding. Rural schools with a budget that usually just covers the bare necessities can benefit from the formation of a good partnership. Outdated school equipment can be replaced with modern equipment with monies from partnerships. Buildings, renovations, and computers are just a few extras that business partnerships can provide.

HOW CAN PARTNERSHIPS BE FORMED?

A partnership can be initiated by either a school or a business. To form a partnership, communication must be established. Each party should be willing to take time to sit down and draw up a definite set of goals. The parties involved must be committed to the time and effort it takes to make a good partnership. Individuals selected from each side should be comfortable working outside their environment and relate well to people. Business-school partnerships can be extremely rewarding--but to work, they need total commitment from both parties.

WHAT ARE SOME SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLES OF SCHOOL-BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS?

--A good example of a rural community education program took place in a community in Iowa with two companies and the schools of that community. The main goal of that partnership was to give students education and experience in the computer field.

--In Virginia, a partnership was set up with the Chesapeake Corporation of Virginia to solve the math teacher shortage. In this partnership, business provided engineers to schools to teach advanced math classes.

--A rural community in Utah formed a partnership to provide educational opportunities for students via a live telelearning network.

--Rural communities in North Carolina realized that they needed stronger mathematics and science programs, so partnerships were utilized to fill the void.

--Southern Georgia has the Marvin Pittman Laboratory School which works with schools in the development of new teaching approaches.

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